

Adult Probationer Themes

General Comments

After visiting a rural northern county, a suburban central county, and an urban southern county, it appears that adult probationers share similar concerns about probation. While no one likes being on probation, most adults have expressed that probation has helped them to solve their problems, especially those that are in specialized treatment programs, such as drug court, substance abuse treatment, and batterers treatment programs. These programs for the most part are intensive (at the beginning of substance abuse treatment the probationer must attend classes and be drug-tested up to three times per week), last from six months to over a year, and provide counseling services. Many adults that were on probation as juveniles reported that probation has improved over the years with regard to the provision of services and their treatment by their probation officer.

A common perception among adults is that probation is a money-making venture for the state, and most probationers think that their fines are very high. The conditions of their probation necessitate their participation in numerous programs, and fines and fees become expensive quickly. Probation should offer more flexible payment plans and reduce finance charges; one probationer reported having to pay a thirty-dollar finance charge on a two hundred dollar fine. Some probationers also feel that they are forced to contribute to funds that are not related to their offense. For example, one adult that committed a victimless crime did not understand why she had to contribute to a victim's fund.

Many probationers feel that probation makes excessive and unrealistic demands – that they are forced to jump through too many hoops. Several probationers have noted the difficulty of juggling all of their terms of probation; they have to either have a full-time job or be a full-time student, go to meetings, treatment, get drug-tested, take care of children, etc. It was suggested that probation should offer child care or child care stipends, as finding child care while at court or in treatment is very difficult and expensive. Generally, probationers think that they are sentenced to excessive amounts of community service. However, there is consensus that probationers feel a greater sense of accomplishment if they are able to participate in building projects or projects that affect their community, rather than activities such as highway or dump clean-up.

Many adults and juveniles are unaware of legal procedures, such as how to petition to remove a felony from their record, and of their conditions of probation, such as whether they have a curfew. They expressed a desire for better access to information about their case and the law, and felt that their public defenders and

probation officers did not do a very good job of explaining their conditions of probation, and offenses for which they could be given a violation.

The difficulty that probationers experience in finding and retaining a job was noted several times. It is difficult to maintain a full-time job when probation demands participation in treatment programs and classes; it was also noted that probation carries a strong stigma with employers. Probation conditions such as travel restrictions and the prohibition of entering establishments that sell liquor have interfered with some probationer's employment, and one adult reported losing several valuable contracts because she would be required to travel outside California. Several adult probationers have mentioned that they wish their probation officer had helped them more to find jobs.

Some probationers feel that the conditions of their probation infringe on the rights of others. For example, one probationer's wife may not drink in their home since the husband is not allowed to have alcohol in the home.

Probation Officers

While most adult probationers like their probation officers, almost everyone had witnessed or experienced an officer treating someone with a lack of respect and/or abusing his/her power, and many requested that probation officers and department staff (such as receptionists) be given personal skills training. One adult commented that whenever she drops off her monthly check-in report, the receptionist treats her well based on her appearance but then starts to treat her rudely when she realizes that she is on probation.

Many probationers feel that probation needs to establish a means of reporting complaints about a probation officer's inappropriate behavior. When one probationer tried to report a probation officer's rudeness to a child's grandparents to a supervisor, she was denied. When she told her own probation officer about the inappropriate behavior, she perceived that her probation officer was upset, yet accustomed to hearing such reports. By the same token, probationers feel that good probation officers should be recognized and rewarded more often. Probationers are very appreciative of their probation officer's efforts to write letters of recommendation for prospective employers and to get their children back from a spouse or from the Department of Social Services.

Several probationers perceive that the more they improve, the more probation officers punish them for minor violations; they feel that the closer they get to completing their programs or getting off probation, their probation officers find minor reasons to give them violations. Instead, they would like to be rewarded for

performing well and to be given more incentives, such as getting their felonies reduced or removed from their records. They feel that their probation officers should mainly be concerned with major violations of their probation, instead of picking on small errors. Several probationers mentioned the fact that their probation officers sometimes abuse their power by threatening them with incarceration for minor violations; they feel that certain officers like to demonstrate their power over probationers.

While it doesn't bother some probationers that probation officers are armed, others feel that they should not wear their guns in a business setting. The latter group perceives that wearing guns in their offices is an unnecessary reminder of a probation officer's power.

Several probationers commented that probation needs to be more personalized; they don't like being treated like a case number. Probationers often have long lists of conditions, some of which are often not applicable to their offense. For example, several adults mentioned having to attend substance abuse treatment classes such as Narcotics or Alcoholics Anonymous when they did not have a substance abuse problem.

Some probationers have had numerous probation officers; they feel that they have been transferred from officer to officer too much. Others have never met their probation officer or have met him/her only once. Many adults understand that probation officers have enormous caseloads, and they request the addition of more officers so that their probation officers have more time to focus on their individual cases. One probationer commented that his probation officer was unprepared in court and didn't have current information about his case. He felt that his probation officer's mistake was unfairly taken out on him in subsequent unpleasant encounters with the officer, since he perceived that the officer was humiliated when the judge received the correct documents from the probationer himself.

It has been widely observed that the attitude and approach of the individual probation officer is a very important factor in the success of a program and the progress of individual probationers. Many adults and juveniles expressed appreciation for probation officers that make an effort to make a program work for them.

Probation Services

Successful programs share several components; these programs employ a counseling-based approach, have strong staff support, intensive drug testing, and last from three months to one year. Conversely, ineffective programs employed

the use of videos, role-playing, or were lecture-style classes in which probationers did not perceive that the staff were dedicated to helping them.

The majority of probationers expressed that intensive substance abuse treatment programs, including residential treatment centers, were effective at keeping them off drugs. Alcoholics or Narcotics Anonymous programs are seen as effective by some probationers and as ineffective by others. Many adults take advantage of the educational services (GED and college classes) of one substance abuse program, but feel that the program's drug testing schedule is inconvenient. They suggest having extended hours to accommodate people with jobs, having more restrooms by utilizing the staff restroom, or allowing clients to test at alternative locations (such as a police station), as testing can sometimes take several hours if many people are called in for drug tests. Several adults in this program report logistical difficulties in getting to their meetings and classes on time, an offense for which several have been given violations. They feel that their probation officers should be more flexible in this area, since the majority of the adults take public transportation and often live or work far from the meeting location.

In many cases anger management classes were evaluated poorly; they were compared negatively to traffic school and DUI classes. Many probationers reported that the manner in which the classes are conducted is counter-productive; many classes involve role-playing, where participants are given a situation and told to express their anger by shouting. They have expressed that the treatment method is not helpful, since they are trying to control their anger instead of expressing it.

A counseling-based batterers treatment program was perceived as being very helpful and effective; many participants attributed a profound personal change to the class and to the counselor. Most participants felt that the counselor really cares about their progress, and that he is more flexible regarding rescheduling classes than other counselors. The class typically lasts one year, but it can last longer if the counselor doesn't feel that the student's treatment has been successful; the counselor calls the students' partners frequently to ask for updates on their behavior at home. One student was self-referred.

Drug court is very highly regarded, due to the individual efforts of and the effective collaboration between the participants' counselors, probation officers, and the drug court judge. Many participants mentioned that the demeanor of their drug court counselor played a big role in their success in the program, and an effective support structure was identified as being a very important factor in the success of the individuals. Participants were grateful that their charges are pending while they are in drug court, and that they are dismissed upon successful completion of the program. Life skills classes are considered to be helpful in

looking for a job, since they include resume-writing and interviewing skills training.

Public Defenders

There is a general consensus among probationers that public defenders have not been very helpful to them, and that in most cases their public defenders did not explain their probation orders to them well. One probationer misunderstood her orders and felt that she was tricked; she chose to go to jail instead of enrolling in a treatment program because the treatment program lasted longer, but when she was released from jail she discovered that she had to go to the treatment program anyway.

The Courts

Some probationers feel that the courts are unfair and favor incarceration over treatment. One probationer that could not afford an attorney felt that she was not treated respectfully by the court because she was representing herself. One participant in the batterers treatment program felt that some judges discriminate against men and always rule in favor of women, even if the woman is charged with battering the man.

Juvenile Probationer Themes

General Comments

Like adult probationers, juveniles in northern rural, central suburban, and southern urban counties share similar concerns about probation, despite location and demographic differences. In all three counties, many more programs and services exist for juveniles than for adults. Several juveniles mentioned that probation is helpful because it deters them from re-offending, and that their probation officers have been helpful in helping them solve their problems. In a day treatment center, the probation officers offer wraparound services and conduct home visits and family counseling sessions to help families work through their problems; the officers that conduct these visits are very well-respected by the children.

Many juveniles report having family members on probation or parole. In one group, four out of five juveniles have family members on probation; one child's father is serving three life sentences in prison, her uncle is also incarcerated, and her brothers are on probation. It is also common for juveniles to have family members or friends in gangs. One juvenile had been given a violation for associating with a gang member, but it was because his cousin, a gang member, was at his family's house for Thanksgiving dinner; he felt that this violation was very unfair.

Overall, juvenile probationers feel that public defenders are not very helpful; one juvenile was told to answer "yes" to the judge's questions even though he didn't understand them. Many juveniles feel that their public defender did not explain their conditions of probation to them well either, and several juveniles were unclear as to whether they have a curfew, what time it is, what type of clothing is prohibited, etc.

Several probationers commented that the police target and hassle minorities for no reason. They report that white officers detain them while walking down the street, and feel that the police looks for excuses to pull over cars with African-Americans or Asian-Americans in them.

Probation Officers

In most cases, probationers have had a probation officer that was helpful. They understand that probation officers are trying to help them, and appreciate when their probation officer gives them chances to improve instead of incarcerating them right away, and when their probation officer arranges social outings.

Like adult probation, the success of individual programs in having a positive impact on the juvenile is largely dependent on the personalities of the program's staff, and their ability to make a connection with the children. Juveniles give higher evaluations to programs when they feel that the staff really care about them and their families.

However, juveniles identified ways in which they thought their relationship with their probation officer could be improved. Some probationers feel that probation officers engage in favoritism and hold double standards, unfairly punishing certain individuals for certain violations that they overlook with other kids. Many juveniles comment that they would like to be rewarded for completing the often numerous conditions of their probation. Probation officers do not praise them for doing well – they are rewarded by not having to see their probation officer as much.

Like adults, juveniles feel that the closer they get to completing their terms of probation, the harder their probation officer tries to violate them for a minor offense. They would prefer that probation officers focus on major violations instead of punishing them for minor offenses.

Many juveniles have had several probation officers in a short period of time and dislike how often their probation officers change. Many probationers have never met their probation officer or have only met him/her once. Some juveniles in Juvenile Hall do not feel that their “outside” probation officers are helpful; their probation officers frequently do not return their phone calls.

Another common comment was that probation officers often do not provide probationers with sufficient information about their case and do not clearly explain their terms of probation to them. Some juveniles are not sure what they are allowed or not allowed to do, and when asked, several probationers reported that they have not been told by their probation officer where they will be placed after leaving Juvenile Hall.

Probation Services

In the three counties visited, more services and programs exist for juveniles than for adults. On several occasions, juveniles report that they would like to have more family and one-on-one counseling, field trips, programs for teenagers, and more job/vocational skills training.

One probationer had been on probation in two counties and reported that their probation departments were very different. He feels that some probation

departments are much stricter and supervision is more intensive in some counties than in others.

A couple of probationers were enrolled in sex offender classes, and they felt that the class was helpful in teaching about personal boundaries, sexual harassment, and the harm they caused to their victims.

Most juveniles feel that anger management classes are not helpful.

Effective Programs

While opinions of programs varied based on individual experience, several recurring components were identified as being helpful to juveniles. Again, the personality of the program staff or probation officer plays a large role in the evaluation of that program. Programs that last 90 days or more are described as more effective than short-term programs. Several probationers said that they prefer small classes and programs, and feel that they are more effective for this reason.

One-on-one counseling is helpful, as well as art therapy. Wraparound services are effective at addressing the needs of children and their parents. Juveniles feel that home visits and family counseling by probation officers are helpful and help juveniles work out problems with their parents. Children think highly of programs that collaborate with community-based organizations like the Boys and Girls Club.

Employment programs are very helpful because they help teenagers write resumes, interview, and find a job in an area that interests them. In one program, the probation department finds conditional employment for the juvenile, and they are normally hired by the employer after they have worked there for a trial period and are recommended by their probation officer.

A prevention/intervention program for girls is very well evaluated; girls like vocational and life skills training classes, counseling, and field trips with other girls.

Substance abuse treatment programs such as residential group homes and juvenile drug court are thought of as being very effective. Many juveniles felt that group homes were helpful in that they were taught responsibility and how to get along with their peers. Frequent drug testing is a deterrent to using drugs.

Educational programs that offer incentives like earning more credits to do more work motivate kids to work harder.

Trust-building activities such as the ropes course are well-liked.

Substance Abuse Programs

Juvenile drug court is very effective at getting kids off drugs. Many juveniles hope to participate in the program. However, it was mentioned that it is very discouraging to have to start the program from the beginning if a participant relapses. Probationers feel that they should be penalized, but should not have all of their good time in the program erased if they relapse; they feel that this penalty is too harsh and makes them feel so far from completing the program that they start using drugs regularly again.

Drug programs that are targeted toward people their own age are more effective. Attending Alcoholics or Narcotics Anonymous with adults is less helpful, because they do not relate as well to older people with substance abuse problems. Residential treatment programs are effective. Allowing the police to give a probationer a breathalyzer test at any time is a good deterrent against drinking.

Some juveniles feel that chemical dependency classes are useful, but others will continue to drink alcohol and use drugs after getting off probation. In boot camp, most kids had used drugs but were not receiving substance abuse treatment classes, even though they exist. Drug videos are ineffective; they are repetitive and boring.

Gang Intervention

Gang intervention programs are seen as ineffective – many juveniles reported that they will continue to associate with gangs after completing the class, since most of their outside friends belong to gangs.

Probationers in gangs mentioned that it is very difficult to stop associating with gangs if family members belong to the gang, and that it is also difficult to stop associating with past friends, especially if they live in the same neighborhood, attend the same school, etc.

Institutions

Juveniles feel that they learn to be better criminals in juvenile hall, and that they fight because they are confined with many people in a small space. Probationers feel that they should attend regular high school instead of institutional schools whenever possible, so that they receive positive reinforcement from teachers and

are exposed to positive role models; they think that confining many people together that have committed crimes is a bad idea. Juveniles feel that they do not receive sufficient support from teachers in institutions.

Several probationers feel that time served in institutions should count starting at the time of their arrest, and that they should get credit towards their sentence for time served. Juveniles would prefer to be placed on electronic monitoring rather than be in Juvenile Hall.

Juvenile Hall doesn't help people with drug programs; people that have substance abuse problems need to go to a treatment facility and receive services for several months in order to be able to resist drugs. Group substance abuse classes in the hall are boring and ineffective; they consist of watching movies about the dangers of using drugs.

Girls would like to be separated by age in Juvenile Hall like the boys; they feel that having all age groups together causes problems, since younger girls are less mature and often provoke older girls. Girls would also like more sports programs in facilities.

Juvenile Hall needs more life skills classes to ensure that teenagers can get jobs and don't return to the hall. They would also like longer family visits and counseling.

Juveniles feel that staff in the institutions provoke them and engage in favoritism. Probationers also think there is a need for more drug counselors and young probation officers, since they relate to younger people better. They feel that more probation officers in general are needed because their probation officers are overworked; more officers would be helpful since kids wouldn't have to spend as much time in Juvenile Hall waiting for placements.

Medical clinics in institutions are bad; girls must place a sick call and wait until the next day to be treated. Many feel that the clinic staff are unskilled.

In boot camp, juveniles feel that it is unfair to penalize the entire group when one person misbehaves.

Education

Almost everyone agreed that schoolwork in institutions and in alternative schools is easy, but allows them to catch up. Most facilities and treatment centers offer

GED or diploma programs. Almost all juveniles would like to return to regular schools.

In Juvenile Hall, students are graded more on their behavior in class than on the quality of work that they complete. They receive credits based on the number of individual packets of work that they complete. Teachers do little or no instruction, since students are at different grade and skill levels. Many feel that the teacher does not have time or does not care enough to help them individually; others report that help is available, but they are not motivated to ask for it.

Volunteer mentors come to a girls treatment facility and help them with schoolwork; the girls feel that the volunteers are better teachers than the teacher in the facility, whom they describe as being sarcastic and unhelpful.

Most juveniles think that they have been assessed for educational needs.